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Advancement of women

Improvement of the situation of women in rural areas

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report responds to General Assembly resolution 56/129 of 19 December 2001. It reviews the attention given to the situation of rural women by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, intergovernmental bodies and processes, the United Nations system and international financial organizations. The report concludes with a summary of the responses received from Member States on the desirability of convening a high-level policy consultation on the situation of rural women.

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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 56/129 of 19 December 2001, the General Assembly recalled the critical role and contribution of rural women in enhancing agricultural and rural development, improving food security and eradicating rural poverty. It also noted the potential marginalization, as well as the benefits, resulting from the process of globalization for rural women. The Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report on the implementation of the resolution on the improvement of the situation of rural women at its fifty-eighth session.

2. The situation of rural women has been on the agenda of the General Assembly for the past two decades. Resolutions of the Assembly have covered the integration of a gender perspective in all rural development policies and programmes, legislative reforms to ensure access to resources and property rights, due recognition for rural women's work, capacity-building and training, and full participation in decision-making. Resolution 56/129 additionally emphasized the need to integrate a gender perspective in macroeconomic policies, promote programmes reconciling the work and family responsibilities of both women and men, and create an environment that does not tolerate violations of the rights of women and girls.[1]

3. The two most recent reports of the Secretary-General on this subject[2] focused on access to productive resources, inputs and services, and on further aspects of the situation of rural women in the context of globalization, such as the diversification of livelihoods, changing patterns of labour mobility and household dynamics.

4. The present report reviews the contribution of the relevant treaty body, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, to improving the situation of rural women. Article 14 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women focuses specifically on the situation of rural women. The Committee's recommendations complement the efforts of intergovernmental bodies and processes, including summits and high-level conferences that have taken place since the submission of the last report in 2001, such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in September 2002 and the International Conference on Financing for Development in Monterrey in March 2002.

5. The report also reviews the preparatory process and the high-level segment of the 2003 substantive session of the Economic and Social Council, which focused on promoting an integrated approach to rural development in developing countries for poverty eradication and sustainable development. The attention paid to the situation of rural women by the Commission on the Status of Women is outlined, as called for in resolution 56/129. The report briefly summarizes recent developments relating to some specialized agencies of the United Nations system and international financial institutions, namely, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Bank.

6. Finally, in response to resolution 56/129, the report reviews the responses received from Member States on the convening of a high-level policy consultation at the governmental level with a view to setting priorities and developing critical strategies that would meet the manifold challenges faced by rural women.

II. Key trends, challenges and recommendations resulting from the implementation of article 14 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

7. The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women provides a definition of discrimination and comprehensively addresses women's rights to equality and non-discrimination in the civil, political, economic, social and cultural fields. It requires States parties to incorporate the principle of equality in national law and take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination, whether committed by public authorities or by any person or organization. States parties are also obliged to adopt legislation prohibiting discrimination, establish legal protection for women on an equal basis with men and provide effective legal, administrative or other remedies against acts of discrimination against women. As at June 2003, 174 countries — 90 per cent of Member States — were States parties.

8. The Convention is the only human rights instrument that specifically addresses the situation of rural women. The Committee's review of States parties' reports has for the past two decades constituted a unique forum for assessing government policies and programmes aimed at the improvement of the situation of rural women.

9. Article 14 of the Convention obliges States parties to take into account the particular problems faced by rural women and the significant roles rural women play in the economic survival of their families. States parties are to ensure that rural women participate in development planning and implementation. Rural women must have access to adequate health-care facilities and family-planning information, counselling and services, and benefit directly from social security programmes. The Convention covers their right to obtain education and training, including with regard to functional literacy, to benefits from community and extension services that would increase their technical proficiency and to participation in all community activities. Rural women are entitled to self-organization in order to obtain equal access to economic opportunities and to have access to agricultural credit and loans, marketing facilities and technology, and equal treatment in land reform and resettlement schemes. States parties are obliged to ensure the right of rural women to enjoy adequate living conditions, including housing, sanitation, electricity, water supply, transport and communications.

10. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women monitors compliance of States parties with the provisions of the Convention. It considers reports in a constructive dialogue with the States parties and adopts concluding comments that include recommendations for further steps to be taken towards full implementation of the Convention. In response, many Governments have introduced new laws, policies and programmes, or amended those found to be discriminatory.

11. A review of 32 concluding comments adopted by the Committee during its eight most recent sessions, from 2000 to 2003,[3] indicates that the expert body consistently inquired into the situation of rural women, encompassing all issues and geographic regions. The Committee has commonly noted that although a significant population of women lives in rural areas, especially in developing countries, national policies rarely account for their important roles. It has emphasized that social investment in women not only ensures their enjoyment of the human rights outlined in the Convention, but also constitutes one of the most effective means of

combating poverty and promoting sustainable development in general. The Committee has therefore urged States parties to incorporate a gender perspective in all development programmes and to pay increased attention to the needs of rural women so as to ensure that they benefit from policies and programmes adopted in all spheres.

12. The Committee has also recognized the specific vulnerability of rural women, for whom discrimination on the basis of sex is compounded by other factors, such as the fact that they generally live in geographically less developed or even marginalized parts of a country and therefore face particularly difficult circumstances, such as poverty, low levels of education and literacy, and high unemployment. The Committee has confirmed the need for specific measures to empower rural women to overcome those constraints. Where applicable, the Committee has emphasized that minority women living in rural areas are even more disadvantaged and require particular attention.

13. The Committee has consistently called on States parties to develop special strategies, policies and programmes in priority areas for rural women and to allocate necessary budgetary resources. It has focused especially on their economic empowerment, as rural women are responsible for the largest part of rural and agricultural work, particularly in developing countries, but do not constitute the majority of resource owners. In its consideration of economic empowerment measures, the Committee has placed emphasis on the need to involve women in poverty alleviation programmes in developing and transitional countries.

14. The Committee has deplored the fact that women's work in rural areas is not considered productive labour and has urged States parties to recognize rural women's contributions to the economy and to ensure their access to credit, capital, employment and marketing opportunities, as well as to productive resources. It has stressed in particular the need for rural women's participation in land reform programmes and their full access to land and property, including through ownership, co-sharing, inheritance and succession. The Committee has directed its recommendations concerning land rights to transitional and developing countries in particular.

15. While the Committee has on occasion commended States parties for reforming land and agrarian legislation, it has expressed its concern that the implementation of such legislation has been impeded by persistent prejudices and the application of customary law and discriminatory practices that continue to prevent women from enjoying their right of access to resources. In this context, the Committee has likewise focused on the participation of rural women in local and national public decision-making, as a means of empowerment and of enhancing access to productive resources.

16. Women's greater economic empowerment and their participation in public life, particularly in decision-making, are also intrinsically linked to their social circumstances. The Committee has emphasized that rural women's empowerment and participation are hampered by their lack of access to health care, education and other social services, such as insurance. It has urged States parties to ensure adequate health care for rural women and to address the particular disadvantages they face due to lack of infrastructure and education, environmental pollution and customs and stereotypes. These can constitute barriers to rural women's access, for example, to family planning, contraception and disease prevention. This leads to

higher maternal and infant mortality and the spread of HIV/AIDS and other diseases. The Committee has noted the disastrous effect of the spread of HIV/AIDS on rural women, due to their double burden as both caregivers and producers of food and goods. The Committee has called upon States parties to take steps to eliminate all practices that are harmful to the health of women and to introduce programmes to raise the awareness of rural women about their rights.

17. The Committee has focused on the low level of education and training of rural women, including the particularly high percentage of illiterate rural women, especially in developing countries. Consequently, it has urged States parties to make available special education and training measures, including agricultural extension services and literacy campaigns, and to ensure that women can use their education to obtain better positions and access to decision-making. The Committee has also called upon States to ensure that rural women obtain relevant training and access. This would ensure that rural women, who often suffer from isolation, could benefit from the personal and professional empowerment offered by technology.

18. The Committee has frequently been faced with insufficient information about the situation of rural women in States parties' reports and has had to request more data and a more comprehensive picture of the situation of rural women. It has called for additional research into the situation of rural women, as the lack of such information has prevented it from reviewing in greater detail States parties' compliance with article 14 of the Convention.

19. The Committee has identified specific areas in national policy, legislation and practice that require attention and the measures to be adopted in those areas. Its concluding comments are intended to enhance the implementation of the Convention in the States parties concerned. Among issues and concerns relating to rural women that are rarely raised in other forums, the Committee, complementing discussions by intergovernmental bodies and United Nations agencies, has, for example, addressed the effect of debt bondage in the context of land rights. It has also highlighted the impact of harmful local customs and practices that perpetuate discrimination, including societal and domestic violence. In this context, the Committee has also pointed to the situation of older rural women who suffer aggravated marginalization and isolation, which exposes them to greater risks of becoming victims of violence.

20. The Committee routinely requests reporting States to disseminate its concluding comments and to support their public discussion, in order to make politicians and government administrators, non-governmental organizations and the public at large aware of the steps required to ensure de jure and de facto equality for women. Follow-up to the Committee's comments thus provides an opportunity for States parties to initiate or intensify action to improve the situation of rural women. States parties could therefore also initiate discussions and share materials with other government bodies that deal with the improvement of the situation of rural women and are involved in follow-up to intergovernmental processes focusing on sustainable rural development, some of which are outlined below.

21. The Committee, in its concluding comments, does not specifically address global or regional developments or consider in detail the impact of macroeconomic policies or development programmes on the situation of rural women in a specific State party. However, in its statement submitted to the World Summit on Sustainable Development,[4] the Committee underlined the disproportionate effect on women of global economic development trends, noted women's disadvantages in benefiting

from economic and social development and pointed out that they suffer disproportionately from poverty, malnutrition and inadequate health care. The Committee noted that all of these phenomena were particularly severe in rural areas and made a series of recommendations for action, including for the specific benefit of rural women.

22. The Committee's work complements intergovernmental processes by putting forward strategies for action that address issues affecting rural women in the process of globalization. Many of the issues taken up by the Committee in its review of States parties' reports are similar to those discussed in intergovernmental forums, as outlined below.

III. Intergovernmental bodies and processes

23. The monitoring process under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women offers Member States that are parties to the Convention an effective tool to focus on action that they have taken or need to take to improve the situation of rural women and to enhance follow-up to intergovernmental processes. Since the submission of the most recent report of the Secretary-General on the improvement of the situation of rural women, a number of intergovernmental bodies and processes have considered this issue within the context of their wider discussions on social development themes. They have generally acknowledged the role of rural women in development processes, but the extent to which they have provided specific recommendations for action to improve the situation of rural women varies.

24. The two most recent high-level events renewed commitments to partnerships between Governments, civil society and the private sector. These partnerships are important in the context of the increasing privatization of resources and services and the need for transparency and accountability. The high-level events also attempted to strengthen the coordination between organizations, institutions and agencies dealing with development issues. They confirmed that the issues regarding rural women that were already noted in other intergovernmental forums devoted to social development still require concerted and sustained attention and action.

A. High-level summits and conferences

1. International Conference on Financing for Development (Monterrey, March 2002)

25. The International Conference on Financing for Development and its outcome document, the Monterrey Consensus,[5] marked a major attempt by the international community to actively mobilize financial resources for development, including through increased consultation with and coordination of relevant stakeholders. The Monterrey Consensus emphasized the need for a holistic approach as a response to current challenges.

26. The Monterrey Consensus also called upon Governments to mainstream the gender perspective into development at all levels and in all sectors. It called for gender-sensitive investments in basic economic and social infrastructure that are fully inclusive of the rural sector, in recognition of the importance of social and

economic aspects in combating poverty and ensuring sustainable development. The Consensus also recognized the importance of microfinance and microcredit schemes, including in rural areas, particularly for women, and advocated capacity-building and gender budget policies in developing countries.

27. The follow-up process to the Monterrey Consensus, which has already led to increased cooperation among the international financial institutions, the United Nations system and other actors in the field of development, should address a number of challenges, including through the inclusion of rural women or their representatives as important stakeholders in these processes.

28. Indeed, a comprehensive analysis of the impact of macroeconomic policy frameworks on the situation of women, in particular rural women in developing countries, is needed. Globalization, especially its trade liberalization and privatization aspects, continues to have an impact on women in rural areas and on their livelihoods in developing countries. While some rural women have benefited from new opportunities, the shift from subsistence agriculture to cash-crop production has also had, in certain cases, negative effects on household food security, access to resources and services, and the environment, disproportionately affecting rural women, who constitute the majority of the poor. The vital role women play in the economy and the rural agricultural sector should be specifically recognized. Policies and programmes aimed at the achievement of development goals, including those set out in the Millennium Declaration, should as a means to address the structural causes of discrimination, consider rural women both key beneficiaries of policies and programmes and stakeholders in decision-making processes.

2. World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, September 2002)

29. The Johannesburg Declaration[9] of the World Summit on Sustainable Development stressed Governments' commitment to ensuring that women's empowerment, emancipation and gender equality are integrated in all the activities encompassed within Agenda 21, the Millennium Development Goals and the Plan of Implementation[10] of the Summit. The Plan of Implementation, in addressing the protection and management of the natural resource base of economic and social development, recognized that agriculture plays a crucial role in addressing the needs of a growing global population and is intrinsically linked to poverty eradication, especially in developing countries. The Plan stated that enhancing the role of women at all levels of rural development, agriculture, nutrition and food security is imperative. Governments were called upon to support the contribution of all appropriate stakeholders, including both men and women, in rural planning and development, and to strengthen institutional frameworks for sustainable development at the national level, where women should be able to participate fully and equally in policy formulation and decision-making.

30. The Plan of Implementation recognized the specific role of women in conserving and using biodiversity in a sustainable way. With a view to changing unsustainable patterns of consumption and production, it was necessary to promote education to provide information for both men and women about available energy sources and technologies and to facilitate access to public information and participation by women at all levels in support of policy and decision-making related to water resource management and project implementation. In focusing on

health and sustainable development, the Plan called for assisting developing countries in providing affordable energy to rural communities, particularly to reduce dependence on traditional fuel sources for cooking and heating, which affect the health of women and children.

31. This renewed commitment is important in view of women's central role in natural resource management and the preservation of environmental security. Environmental degradation, natural disasters and the effects of unsustainable development have particularly affected rural women and girls. In particular, rural women suffer inequality in their access to water, sanitation and basic health services. In both developing and developed countries, services are being privatized, which may result in additional costs to the users. Rural women also tend to be at greater risk than men of being exposed to domestic toxic substances, due to unequal sharing of household responsibilities.

32. The Plan of Implementation also stressed the need for women's equal access, inter alia, to economic opportunity, land, property and credit. Referring in particular to sustainable development in Africa, it called for the promotion of and support for efforts and initiatives to secure equitable access to land tenure and clarification of resource rights and responsibilities, through land and tenure reform processes that respect the rule of law. It also called for access to credit that would enable women producers to become decision makers and owners in the sector, including the right to inherit land.

33. During the process of follow-up to the Summit, Governments will be striving to meet the challenges outlined in the outcome documents. One of those challenges is the need to work towards the practical implementation of previous outcome documents whose targets and objectives have yet to be met, including chapter 24 of Agenda 21,[8] the Millennium Declaration and the eight Millennium Development Goals. As confirmed by the Summit, the achievement of these goals is also intrinsically linked to improvements in the situation of rural women.

B. Economic and Social Council

34. The theme of the 2003 high-level segment of the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council — "Promoting an integrated approach to rural development in developing countries for poverty eradication and sustainable development" — provided an additional opportunity for Member States to consider at the intergovernmental level the situation of women within the context of integrated rural development.

35. The report of the Secretary-General to the Council dated 2 April 2003[9] focused attention on the role of rural women in its consideration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions, as well as questions of transparency and participation, that need to be considered in addressing this issue. The report emphasized, inter alia, that efforts to make improvements in the economic and environmental dimensions of integrated rural development had to take into account women farmers' considerable knowledge of local environmental resource management and food security issues. The appropriate use of modern technology, generally not made available to the poorest sectors of the rural population, which include the majority of rural women, was also deemed important. Improvements in the social dimension of integrated rural development could be effected by greater equality of access to health services,

including HIV/AIDS protection and care, educational facilities, participation in rural institutions and programmes that counteract social exclusion, especially that of older rural women.

36. The preparatory process for the high-level segment of the Economic and Social Council provided opportunities for dialogue between Member States, independent experts, non-governmental representatives and various actors within the United Nations system.[10] Within the framework of Economic and Social Council brainstorming dialogue sessions, a number of round tables covered the major social, economic, political and environmental aspects of integrated rural development, notably education, interconnections between HIV/AIDS and poverty, population and reproductive health, rural productivity, agriculture for the eradication of poverty, and rural energy development. In the discussions it was noted that issues are interconnected and need to be approached holistically: e.g., the fight against the HIV/AIDS epidemic should not be considered a health issue only, but should be seen as an important measure to reduce poverty and enable women to address disempowering relationships at home and in society at large. The conclusions stressed the need for women to be seen as agents of change in integrated rural development.

37. The ministerial declaration of the high-level segment of the Council's substantive session, adopted in Geneva on 2 July 2003,[11] stressed the need for rural development to become an integral part of national and international development policies and of the United Nations system's activities and programmes. It called for an enhanced role for rural women at all levels of rural development, including in decision-making, and included a focus on the priorities of rural women in the various themes it addressed. It emphasized the importance of recognition of their work, and their need for access to resources. It noted the effect of HIV/AIDS on rural women and the need for effective measures to combat the epidemic. It called for an overall approach that integrates the social, economic and environmental dimensions, takes into account the needs of local rural stakeholders, in particular women, and ensures a participatory process. The ministerial declaration renewed calls for speeding up the implementation of existing commitments.

38. The Economic and Social Council high-level segment and its preparatory process confirmed that effective strategies for integrated rural development need to recognize the continuing structural inequalities and rural women's limited access to and control over resources, services, markets and decision-making processes as major reasons for the increasing poverty among rural women. Integrated rural development, as a means of achieving internationally agreed development goals, can be effective only if it recognizes the important contribution women make to the production of agricultural goods, food security, natural resource management and, thus, overall sustainable development.

39. The empowerment of rural women requires their participation or representation in national and international institutions and decision-making processes, such as Common Country Assessments, United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, as well as in consultation processes focusing on the implementation of commitments undertaken by intergovernmental processes.

40. The process of implementation of and follow-up to the ministerial declaration of the Economic and Social Council high-level segment will provide Governments,

the United Nations system and non-governmental organizations with further opportunities to increase their attention to the central role of rural women in development processes and to make them a key target group and focus, both as active agents of change and beneficiaries, of all policies and programmes. As agreed at the high-level segment, the 2005 substantive session of the Council will review the implementation of the ministerial declaration. The annual sessions of all of the Council's functional commissions provide important forums for enhancing the focus on rural women.

C. Commission on the Status of Women

41. The 1995 Beijing Declaration[12] and Platform for Action[13] and the outcome documents of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly[14] in 2000 highlighted the importance of formulating specific programmes for the benefit of rural women, as well as integrating their perspectives into all policies and programmes in both developing and developed countries. The Commission on the Status of Women, as the body mandated to supervise and follow up on implementation, has taken the situation of rural women into account as a cross-cutting issue in its annual deliberations of specific areas of concern since 1996.

42. Resolution 56/129 invited the Commission to pay due attention to the situation of rural women in the consideration of the priority themes identified in its multi-year programme of work for the period 2002-2006. The four themes considered by the Commission in 2002 and 2003 have obvious connections to the situation of rural women, which is duly reflected in the agreed conclusions or outcomes of panel discussions and other meetings organized around these themes.

43. At its forty-sixth session, in 2002, the Commission focused on eradicating poverty, including through the empowerment of women throughout their life cycle in a globalizing world. Recognizing that women and children often bear the greatest burden of poverty, the agreed conclusions on eradicating poverty called for the development of appropriate socio-economic policies that promote equal access to and control over resources and markets for poor women, including rural women. Governments and other stakeholders were requested to ensure that legislative and administrative reform processes promote rural women's rights to resources, in particular land, inheritance and financial services and benefits. In this context, the Commission requested that data on women's equal access to land and other property be included in United Nations reports.

44. The Commission also considered gender perspectives of environmental management and mitigation of natural disasters at its forty-sixth session, focusing on the empowerment of women, including rural women. A panel discussion on the theme pointed to the importance of using existing knowledge held by rural women and their networks. The agreed conclusions adopted by the Commission called for rural women's involvement in developing laws, policies, programmes and training initiatives relating to natural resource and disaster management. Women's equal access to resources, in particular land and property, and the empowerment of women as producers and consumers, were also underscored.

45. In its consideration of the priority theme of women's human rights and the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls, a panel discussion at the forty-seventh session of the Commission, in 2003, emphasized the need to take

into account the particular vulnerability of rural women. Because of geographic and economic isolation and marginalization, rural women are often at greater risk of being subjected to violence, especially domestic violence, and trafficking.

46. The agreed conclusions on the Commission's second priority theme for 2003, women's participation in and access to the media and information and communication technologies (ICT), and their impact on, and use as an instrument for, the advancement and empowerment of women, while not specifically referring to the situation of rural women, called for the removal of infrastructure barriers that disproportionately affect women and pointed out the importance of finding ways to adapt information and communication technologies to the needs of poor women. A panel discussion pointed out the importance of the media, with radio, in particular, highlighted as a means for poor women, especially in rural areas, to obtain information and increase knowledge. Access for disadvantaged women to education and training, and to media- and ICT-based economic activities, including at the decision-making level, would enable them to use new technologies as an instrument for their advancement and empowerment.

47. With a view to enhancing attention to gender perspectives in the preparations for and final outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society, the Commission also submitted its agreed conclusions as an input to this process. The preparatory process has already highlighted the digital and media divide between and within countries, including with regard to urban and rural populations. A focus on the situation of rural women, in both developing and developed countries, could emphasize their potential role as beneficiaries, but also as important stakeholders. The perspectives of rural women should be incorporated in the final outcome documents of the Summit.

48. The Commission on the Status of Women will continue to pay due attention to the situation of rural women in the monitoring of critical areas of concern and the consideration of priority themes at its future sessions, thus complementing the work undertaken by other intergovernmental bodies and processes and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. There are connections that should be explored by Governments in greater detail when the Commission deals with its priority themes for 2004-2006: the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality; women's equal participation in conflict prevention, management and conflict resolution and in post-conflict peace-building; review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century"; current challenges and forward-looking strategies for the advancement and empowerment of women and girls; enhanced participation of women in development: an enabling environment for achieving gender equality and the advancement of women, taking into account, inter alia, the fields of education, health and work; and equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels.

IV. Specialized agencies and international financial institutions: International Fund for Agricultural Development, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and World Bank

49. Since the submission of the last report of the Secretary-General on the improvement of the situation of women in rural areas, there have been some new developments in the policies and programmes of a number of specialized agencies and international financial institutions, which ensure the practical application of evolving concepts relating to the role of women in rural development.

50. The new Strategic Framework of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) for 2002-2006 considers addressing gender inequalities and building rural women's capacities as essential conditions for reducing poverty. The Strategic Framework also views empowerment, and the connections between political and economic empowerment, as critical factors. In evaluating its projects, IFAD has found that projects have been most successful when activities improve women's economic status and their organizational and decision-making capacities have been complemented by investments in assets, services and education, such as water supply, health and literacy initiatives.[15]

51. IFAD focuses on increasing women's access to and control over income and access to land, credit and improved market linkages; building women's knowledge and skills; strengthening women's organization and their representation in political bodies, and meeting women's practical needs. It supports sensitization measures to enable men and other sectors of local communities to engage with women as partners.[16] Future challenges for the Fund include increasing impact at the field level, measuring it effectively and achieving sustainability.

52. The Gender and Development Plan of Action (2002-2007) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), adopted in Rome in November 2001, presents a framework for mainstreaming gender perspectives into the work of FAO. It is aimed at removing the obstacles to women's and men's equal and active participation in, and enjoyment of the benefits of agricultural and rural development. It emphasizes that a transformed partnership based on equality between women and men is an essential condition for people-centred sustainable agricultural and rural development. The Plan recognizes the full participation of women and men and equal access to productive resources as fundamental prerequisites for achieving food security for all. Production increases should be achieved without overburdening women farmers, and women's roles in international trade negotiations should be considered. The Plan also emphasizes specific requirements of rural women in situations of emergency and addresses activities specifically targeting women (e.g., microcredit and investment). The need for collecting sex-disaggregated data is also underlined.

53. The Plan incorporates the outcome of the High-level Consultation on Rural Women and Information, held in 1999. Its Strategy for Action, "Gender and food security — the role of information", stresses, inter alia, the important role of the media in bridging the rural-urban divide and in communicating a more accurate picture of the contributions of rural women and men to agriculture and the rural economy. It also emphasizes the importance of providing access to information and communication technologies for rural women and men. In its policy and programme

development. FAO has recently focused on the effect of HIV/AIDS on women and food security in rural areas.

54. In its 2002 publication *Reaching the Rural Poor, a Renewed Strategy for Rural Development*, the World Bank recognized the importance of integrating gender perspectives into all aspects of rural development as a cross-cutting issue. According to the World Bank, women represent up to 70 per cent of the rural poor and play a major role in the survival strategies and the economy of poor rural households. The new strategy calls for raising the profile of rural development efforts and addressing the issue in its entirety, fostering an enabling environment for broad-based and sustained growth, forging alliances between all stakeholders and addressing the impact of global developments on client countries. One of the underlying factors of success in agricultural development identified by the World Bank is that the needs of women must be built into programmes.[17] Non-farm economic activities are also considered as an important source of employment for rural women. The World Bank committed itself to paying close attention to women's demands and needs with regard to strengthening skills.[18]

55. A priority of the strategy is to help make institutions more responsive to the rural poor, and the activities of the World Bank will focus on strengthening the political voice of women and other groups.[19] One of its greatest challenges in the implementation phase, to be monitored and evaluated over the next five years, is to ensure that rural poverty is truly reflected in Bank-supported programmes and operations in the manner and form envisaged in the strategy.[20]

V. Convening of a high-level policy consultation: views of Member States

56. In response to resolution 56/129, the Secretary-General sent a note verbale to Member States on 28 April 2003, seeking their views on the desirability of convening a high-level policy consultation at the governmental level with a view to setting priorities and developing critical strategies that would meet the manifold challenges faced by rural women. By 16 July, replies had been received from 29 Member States.

57. Argentina, Belarus, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Cape Verde, Chile, China, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Fiji, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Madagascar, Malaysia, Maldives, Mexico, Morocco, Panama, the Philippines, the Russian Federation, Sierra Leone, Thailand, the United Republic of Tanzania and Viet Nam supported the convening of a consultation or considered it very appropriate or highly relevant.

58. Greece, replying on behalf of the European Union[21] and the acceding countries,[22] and the Republic of Korea raised questions regarding the appropriate forum and/or the timing for considering the situation of rural women.

59. Greece believed that the high-level segment of the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council in 2003 provided the opportunity for such consultation and priority-setting. The European Union intended to promote the meaningful reflection of a gender-equality perspective in the high-level segment debate and its output, and to emphasize the benefits of an operational and action-oriented outcome, the implementation of which could be carefully monitored. The

European Union did not therefore see the need for a separate exercise until the implementation of the output of the high-level segment could be assessed.

60. The Republic of Korea stated that it would find it more acceptable for the deliberations on the improvement of the situation of rural women to be held in the Commission on Sustainable Development, FAO or IFAD, rather than in a separate high-level policy consultation convened at the governmental level. It further believed that the holding of consultations in those forums would not detract from the goal of according priority to the articulation of strategies in meeting the challenges faced by rural women.

61. A number of Member States that supported the convening of a consultation also provided additional suggestions for topics to be addressed. Cambodia stated that the discussions would help in the formulation of further strategies to improve the livelihood of women in rural areas and to ameliorate poverty. Fiji replied that the high-level policy consultation approach would focus required international attention on the conditions and situations women face in rural areas and could elaborate monitoring mechanisms and means to implement commitments contained in both the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation and the Millennium Development Goals. Malaysia stated that the consultation would provide Member States with a platform for developing more effective and appropriate policies, strategies and programmes in the process of the economic and social development of women in rural areas.

62. Mexico stated that a consultation could provide the opportunity to exchange experience in programmes concerning rural issues that had shown results. It would be important to know more details about the objectives, modalities and expected results of the consultation. The results of the Third World Congress of Rural Women, held in Spain in 2002, could be taken into account by such a forum.

63. The Philippines suggested that, in order to derive maximum benefit from the event, country papers could be prepared and submitted before the consultation. Such an arrangement would give the Secretariat an idea of the wide range of accomplishments and issues faced by Member States. The papers would also serve as a basis for preparing a more focused agenda for the consultation. Priorities and strategies should address rural electrification, sanitation and housing as part of infrastructure development in the rural setting, and clear social safety-net programmes and community-based support systems to help people withstand adverse economic environments, and respond to short-term emergencies as well as long-term concerns. The Philippines also stated that the United Nations might consider having a parallel consultation with non-governmental organizations and/or requiring Member States to undergo a multisectoral national consultation in the preparation of their respective country papers.

64. The United Republic of Tanzania found merit in the proposal of convening a high-level policy consultation at the governmental level with a view to setting priorities and developing critical strategies that would address challenges faced by women in rural areas.

65. Thailand believed that the United Nations should develop policies with global application to support education and vocational training for women in rural areas with a view to, inter alia, preventing rural women from falling victim to trafficking.

66. A number of Member States that supported the convening of a consultation provided additional comments. Chile stressed the importance of sustainable rural

development. China stated that women play a critical role in enhancing social development and achieving gender equality, with women in rural areas accounting for an overwhelming majority. The improvement of the situation of women in rural areas would not only further promote the follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women, but also contribute to the implementation of the Millennium Declaration and the realization of the Millennium Development Goals. Colombia stated that rural women made an important contribution to agricultural and rural development and played a fundamental role in ensuring food security.

67. Fiji stated that the need to address issues affecting women had to be looked at in its totality. It required an appropriate international environment that would mobilize political will and resources to bring about change and/or increase the momentum of change in the various countries. The commitments of countries at the global and regional level were well acknowledged, yet their enforcement had not progressed at a desirable speed. This was largely due to a lack of political commitment, as well as inadequate monitoring mechanisms.

68. Malaysia stated that poverty had become a global issue demanding the attention of all Member States. It was therefore imperative to empower rural women to enable them to actively participate in all spheres of life within the terms of the basic principles set out in the Geneva Declaration for Rural Women.

69. A number of Member States that supported the convening of a consultation provided additional information on their countries' own involvement in this area, or on regional initiatives. Colombia stated that it had been considered a pioneering country regarding public policy on rural women because of its 2002 Law on Rural Women, which took into account the demands and suggestions of rural women.

70. The Dominican Republic replied that it had started a national consultation through regional meetings with rural women in order to identify outstanding difficulties and find solutions. The second phase of this consultation would be implemented with government bodies dealing with the agricultural sector at the national level, and would culminate in a meeting with all public institutions carrying out programmes in rural areas that have an impact on the situation of women. The results of the consultation would be published for use as the basis for future policy and action and forwarded to the United Nations.

71. Jordan stated that attention to the situation of rural women was included in the preparation of the plans and programmes of the Arab Women's Organization. Policies and priorities had been established for programmes and plans in accordance with the guidelines set out in relevant documents, and the priorities centred on education, information and law.

72. Madagascar referred to the strategic orientations in its national policy for the advancement of women for a balanced development of men and women. The improvement of the situation of rural women was the focus of this policy, and Madagascar was committed to making rural women real actors and beneficiaries of development. Panama stated that measures undertaken gave particular attention to the situation of rural women in national, regional and global development strategies. The Philippines stated that a consultation was consistent with initiatives of its current Administration on poverty alleviation and women's empowerment, particularly for rural areas.

73. A number of Member States submitted additional materials. Argentina and Lebanon submitted comprehensive reports on the situation of rural women in their countries. Jordan submitted the concept of the planning and policy committee for programmes and activities of the Arab Women's Organization, the Amman Declaration and final communiqué, and the Arab Women's Organization's strategy for improving the conditions of Arab women. Panama submitted a report on the measures taken to implement the outcomes of United Nations summits and conferences. Tunisia submitted its national action plan for rural women. The United Republic of Tanzania provided a short presentation on government action in relation to the situation of women in general and those in rural areas in particular.

74. The General Assembly may wish to take the views expressed by Member States into account when giving further consideration to the desirability of convening a high-level policy consultation at the governmental level.

VI. Conclusions and recommendations

75. **Discussions at the intergovernmental level, including the recent Summit on Sustainable Development and International Conference on Financing for Development, the high-level segment of the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council and the discussion in the Commission on the Status of Women, have led to a greater focus on the situation of rural women and enlarged the existing body of recommendations, especially regarding the need to integrate the needs of rural women into the development of programmes. The important role of rural women at the policy and decision-making level was cited in the ministerial declaration of the Economic and Social Council high-level segment.**

76. **The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has been an important monitoring mechanism of all aspects of the situation of rural women, focusing on the implementation of policies and programmes in both developed and developing countries and promoting enhanced emphasis on the implementation of treaty obligations and other commitments. Renewed attention to compliance with treaty obligations can complement and enhance follow-up to intergovernmental processes. Because of the complementarity of the discussions in various bodies and processes, follow-up is most effective when undertaken in a coordinated manner.**

77. **Governments, international organizations, including those of the United Nations system, and non-governmental organizations should use the concluding comments and recommendations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women when formulating policies and designing programmes focused on the improvement of the situation of rural women.**

78. **Governments should ensure that the Committee's concluding comments and recommendations from intergovernmental processes are shared with all government bodies directly involved in sustainable rural development programmes, so that they are aware of existing treaty obligations and recommendations aimed at improving the situation of rural women and can be actively involved in implementation and follow-up.**

79. **Governments and international organizations, including those of the United Nations system, should ensure that:**

(a) **the integrated process of follow-up to the major summits and conferences in the economic and social field, in particular the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the International Conference on Financing for Development, focuses explicitly on the situation of rural women;**

(b) **the process of follow-up to the high-level segment of the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council considers rural women as the key stakeholders in sustainable rural development. The priorities of rural women should be addressed in all policies and programmes, and rural women should be consulted and involved in the formulation of policies and programmes;**

(c) **the forthcoming World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva and Tunis addresses the priorities and needs of rural women and ensures their participation in developing and implementing global information and communication technology strategies;**

(d) **the perspectives of rural women are taken into account, and they participate in all areas, including in emergencies, humanitarian activities, peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction.**

Notes

[1] Resolution 56/129, para. 6 (a), (f) and (h).

[2] A/54/123-E/1999/66 and A/56/268.

[3] Twenty-second session (January 2000): Belarus, Burkina Faso, the Congo, Germany, India, Jordan, Myanmar; twenty-third session (June 2000): Cameroon, Cuba, Iraq, Lithuania, the Republic of Moldova, Romania; twenty-fourth session (January/February 2001): Egypt, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan; twenty-fifth session (July 2001): Guinea, Nicaragua, Viet Nam; twenty-sixth session (January/February 2002): Estonia, Portugal, the Russian Federation, Sri Lanka, Trinidad and Tobago; twenty-seventh session (June 2002): Suriname, Tunisia; exceptional session (August 2002): Armenia, Uganda, Yemen; twenty-eighth session (January 2003): Albania, the Congo, Kenya.

[4] See *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-seventh Session, Supplement No. 38* (A/57/38), part one, paras. 422-429.

[5] *Report of the International Conference on Financing for Development, Monterrey, Mexico, 18-22 March 2002* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.02.II.A.7), chap. I, resolution 1, annex.

[6] *Report of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, South Africa, 26 August-4 September 2002* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.03.II.A.1), chap. I, resolution 1, annex.

[7] Ibid., resolution 2, annex.

[8] Chapter 24 of Agenda 21 focuses on global action for women, including the increased participation of women in decision-making, the need for sex-disaggregated data, education and capacity-building, equal sharing of household tasks by women and men, adequate health-care facilities, employment opportunities, and the establishment of rural banking systems with a view to facilitating rural women's access to credit, land and other resources.

[9] E/2003/51.

[10] These included the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the Food and Agriculture

Organization of the United Nations, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, the United Nations Population Fund, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the International Labour Office and the World Health Organization.

[11] See E/2003/L.9.

[12] *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4-15 September 1995* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.13), chap. I, resolution 1, annex I.

[13] Ibid., annex II.

[14] Resolutions S-23/2, annex, and S-23/3, annex.

[15] See "Women as agents of change", IFAD discussion paper, February 2003, p. 9.

[16] Ibid.

[17] *Reaching the Rural Poor: A Renewed Strategy for Rural Development*, World Bank, Washington, D.C., 2002, p. 15.

[18] Ibid., p. 19.

[19] Ibid., p. 23.

[20] Ibid., pp. 29, 30 and 32.

[21] Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

[22] Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.